

# Thesis on filial debt: Towards an ethics of filial-parental responsibility and reciprocity

BY XEMA GATNAU

## 1. Founding principle

Human existence is not the result of a voluntary act on the part of the person born, but rather of **aradical donation of life, time, resources and affection** by those who conceived and raised him. This original asymmetry does not exempt him from obligations; on the contrary, it establishes them.

## 2. Against the myth of absolute autonomy

Modern liberal ethics has been built on the fiction of an autarchic, disengaged individual, free from all unchosen debt. But every human being is born into a network of prior ties: language, culture, body, mother, father. The denial of this root does not emancipate; it mutilates.

## 3. Debt as a structure, not as a punishment

It's not about blaming or demanding blind devotion. It's about **recognize a structure of vital reciprocity**: Anyone who has received the gift of life and parenthood, even without asking for it, owes a moral debt to those who made it possible.

## 4. Beyond the State: the priority of the family

In the moral architecture of the individual, duty to parents precedes—and exceeds—duty to the State. Taxes are paid without prior choice; denying the legitimacy of a contribution to parents for lack of consent is inconsistent.

## 5. Fair institutionalization of debt

This debt should not depend on subjective whim, legal disputes, or proof of the parent's poverty. It can and should be structured as **aautomatic, proportional and universal contribution**, based on the offspring's financial means, managed administratively, with

exceptions only in extreme cases. Only abusive parents would be excluded from this intergenerational intrafamily contribution.

#### **6. The moral memory of the species**

Intergenerational transmission is not only biological or cultural: it is also moral. When the chain of structured gratitude is broken, the species heads toward civilizational erosion. The family is not a remnant of the past: it is the first place where we learn to respond to what we have received.

#### **7. Natalism: saving humanity by incentivizing those who save it**

In a world experiencing population decline and heading toward demographic extinction in many regions, encouraging births is not an ideological choice, but a structural necessity. Public policies must stop viewing families as passive beneficiaries and recognize their active role in social sustainability. Having children today is an act of generosity with collective value, the individual cost of which should be compensated.

Therefore, a fair policy is one that rewards those who assume this responsibility. It's not just about providing assistance for diapers, but about recognizing—even in old age—the vital contribution of those who conceived, raised, and educated the next generation. Child-parent debt is, in this sense, a mechanism of active intergenerational justice.

#### **8. Utilitarianism: a final tax that stays at home**

From a utilitarian perspective, the value of a policy is measured by its ability to maximize general well-being. Child-parent debt, structured as an automatic and proportional payment, fulfills this function with remarkable efficiency: it reduces the burden on public systems, strengthens family ties, and improves the quality of life of the elderly without creating dependency on care.

Unlike traditional taxes, whose redistribution is diluted in impersonal structures, this contribution has a clear, concrete, and verifiable purpose: it returns directly to those who made the initial vital investment. It is a local tax, with immediate effects and incalculable emotional and social returns. Furthermore, by institutionalizing reciprocity without bureaucracy or litigation, it reduces family conflicts and aligns incentives between generations.

Far from being a burden, this mechanism represents an optimization of the care system: it transforms moral debt into political action and intergenerational solidarity into real well-being. Instead of impersonal transfers, the effective contribution of parents is recognized, thus aligning justice with utility.

## **7. The proposal**

A **parental support fee**, automatic and progressive, managed by the tax system, would in practice recognize this moral debt. It would tangibly link what is taken for granted today: that parents support their children, and that children, when the time comes, must support—even if only in part—those who supported them first.

## Operation

We owe everything to fathers. Most men still want children, but can't or can't find the right time. Women mostly want it too, although for many it's less of a priority, and by the time they finally decide, "the time has passed." The main reason people don't have children **NO** It's strictly economic, even though raising children is becoming increasingly expensive. Public aid could encourage births, provided they were much more generous. But any measure is insufficient.

That is why it would be useful to establish **intrafamily filial debt**:

- **Universal contribution**—Children, as soon as they enter the labor market, would pay their parents an amount starting from the first euro of their income, which would progressively increase according to their income threshold.
- **Refund of expenses after reaching the age of majority**—First, everything the parents have contributed to their child after the child turns 18 would be returned, recorded in a special account designated for recording such bidirectional payments. Capitalization at the legal interest rate is permitted.
- **Partial refund of investment in childhood and adolescence**—When the previous balance is exhausted, a smaller percentage of what the parents invested during early child-rearing would be returned.

Everything would be managed in **administrative and automatic**, without requiring the parent to demonstrate extreme need or the offspring to prove abundance. Only if it is proven **serious need of the father, exceptional abundance of the son, or both**, a court could, upon request, multiply the contribution percentage.

The moral justification is clear: although the child did not choose to be born, he owes everything to his parents, even more than to the State, to which he also does not choose to pay taxes. After all, the survival of the species is far more important than the mere existence of the State.



# Moral justification of child-parental debt: reciprocity beyond the contract

## 1. Life as an original gift not chosen, but binding

No person chooses to be born. All existence begins as the result of other people's decisions, embodied in an act of vital donation: procreation and nurturing. This donation, although unilateral, **is not morally neutral**. Even without having requested it, the child becomes a debtor to those who made his existence possible, for as long as he remains alive. As Emmanuel Lévinas argues:

"The fact of being obliged before having consented is the very essence of ethics."

*(Totality and infinity, 1961)*

This original obligation is neither contractual nor chosen, but that does not invalidate it: it is its foundation. An ethic centered on the autonomous individual fails if it does not recognize the **constitutive passivity** of childhood and the moral debt that emerges from it.

## 2. Against the fiction of absolute autonomy

Liberal moral theory has promoted a view of the subject as a sovereign agent, detached from unchosen contexts and relationships. However, this narrative is philosophically untenable. As Alasdair MacIntyre asserts:

"We become independent rational agents only because we were previously rational dependents."

*(Dependent Rational Animals, 1999)*

Dependency is neither a pathological state nor an exception: it is the normal condition of the human being at his most vulnerable stage. Any coherent ethics must, therefore, recognize the founding role of **family relationship** in the construction of moral identity.

## 3. Filial duty as a natural moral structure

In many non-Western cultures, such as classical Confucianism, filial duty is the **foundation of moral and social life**. Mencius, heir of Confucius, declared:

"Serving one's parents with one's whole body and will is the foundation of humanity."  
(*Mengzi*, Libro 4A)

This principle is not based on personal affection or immediate reciprocity, but on the **recognition of a previous moral order**, which assigns each member a role and responsibilities. Debt to parents isn't sentimental: it's structural.

Similarly, Simone Weil states:

"Duty to what made us possible precedes all rights."  
(*Rooting*, 1949)

Filiation is not a contingent relationship, but a **ontological root**. To deny it is to deny one's own condition of being received, of being the fruit of a first welcome.

#### **4. Gratitude, justice and moral asymmetry**

Unlike contractual exchanges, the parent-child relationship is essentially **asymmetrical**. Parents give for years without demanding anything in return, in a one-way act of giving. This asymmetry isn't unfair: it's what life allows. But as the child matures, this asymmetry can no longer be used as an excuse for indifference.

David Archard points out that:

"Even if parenting is not requested, its intrinsic value generates a moral obligation of gratitude or compensation."  
(*Children: Rights and Childhood*, 2004)

Gratitude is not just a feeling, but a form of moral justice. Giving back part of what has been received, even when it wasn't asked for, is an act of acknowledgment of one's own history.

#### **5. Beyond the State: Family as a Primary Moral Community**

In modern democracies, the state has assumed many caregiving functions that previously fell to the family. However, this does not

mean that family ties are ethically irrelevant. Michael Sandel writes:

"We are not born free and isolated. We are born into historical communities, with bonds that constitute us."  
(*Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 1982)

The duty to parents is no less legitimate than the duty to tax. If the obligation to contribute to the general welfare through taxes is accepted, then even more so should a moderate, automatic, and universal contribution to those who raised us be accepted.

## **6. Utilitarianism: proximity and finalist taxes.**

From a utilitarian perspective, the parental support fee is a tax with concrete, measurable, and immediate benefits. Unlike traditional taxes, which are diluted in impersonal structures, this contribution strengthens a direct bond: that of children supporting those who supported them. It generates immediate positive effects: reducing the burden on the public system, increasing family cohesion, and dignifying old age.

Furthermore, by remaining within the family, this "proximity tax" avoids the undesirable effects of bureaucratization or welfare clientelism. It doesn't require expenditure oversight, but rather recognition of past merits or lack of demerits. It is distributive justice directed to those who deserve it most: those who made our existence possible.

## **7. Natalism and eschatology.**

The falling birth rate not only threatens pensions or productivity: it jeopardizes the very sense of human continuity. Civilizations do not die from wars, but from a lack of generational replacement. The decision to have children is not purely private: it has eschatological, that is, ultimate, consequences. A society that stops reproducing itself has renounced its future.

Therefore, child-parental debt is not only a matter of retrospective justice, but of collective hope. Recognizing and compensating those



who bring life into the world also affirms that continued existence is worthwhile. The ethics of vital reciprocity is, therefore, also an ethics of the future.

## **8. Transparency and recognition: institutionalizing vital reciprocity**

A "parental support fee," automatic and proportional to the child's income, would be a concrete way of translating this moral duty into institutional practice. It would not replace pensions, but would complement the principle of solidarity with that of **family recognition**. This contribution:

- It would not require litigation or judicial proof of necessity.
- It would apply from the first euro of income, with progressive rates.
- It would reflect in figures what is already recognized in the abstract: **that our parents have given us everything.**

## **7. Conclusion: towards relational justice**

Justice is not limited to distributing goods among abstract and isolated individuals. It also requires recognizing the **founding links** of the person in the "genealogical network" or "lineage network." Institutionalizing filial parental debt is not a return to the past, but **give political form** to an ancient and current truth: that no one makes it alone, and that what is received deserves, in justice, to be reciprocated.

The future of social cohesion lies in rediscovering this morality of vital reciprocity. Not as nostalgia, but as a horizon.